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Evolution of Russian Military Force Since 1979

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Abstract

This paper aims to show the evolution of the Russian military through the wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine. Each conflict provides a lesson in army organization, strategy, and tactics to the Russian military. The section on Afghanistan details the strategy of the Soviet invasion. Rough terrain as well as too much emphasis on holding critical routes drew attention away from creating positive interactions with the local population. Only protecting critical routes allowed the Mujahideen to operate freely and harass Soviet helicopters. The section on Chechnya argues that the Russian military learned that contracted, professional soldiers in conjunction with special forces were more effective than conscripts. The conflict in Georgia broadened warfare to include cyber, economic, and political attacks. The final section about Ukraine argues that through the Gerasimov doctrine, Russia is able to use ambiguity to achieve its foreign policy goals in countries of the former Soviet Union.

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Introduction

Russia is no stranger to armed conflict—a large amount of their patriotism and cultural identity stems directly from the hard fought battles and eventual victory of World War II. Military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz famously said, “War is the continuation of politics by other means,” referring to the point after diplomacy has broken down or perhaps even sidestepped altogether. In a period defined by multinational coalitions and cooperation, Russia has largely remained true to a doctrine of unilateral problem solving that put it at odds with much of the Western world. In its multiple instances of armed conflict, Russia has been accused by experts of breaching international laws and customs. Due to this, Russia is seen as an outsider in the predominantly Euro-centric and Americentric international systems. Russia is still a major player in the international community, as evidenced by its new emphasis on foreign intervention. This may be due to Russia’s independence and simultaneous resistance of globalist trends, or residual tensions from the Cold War period. By isolating the reasons why the Russian Federation uses conflict, we may better understand its foreign policy and how it approaches problems such as international terrorism, regional issues, and other players in the international system. More importantly, it will provide a conceptual framework to extrapolate upon to see how it will interact in these areas in the future. As of April 2017, Russia is generally viewed as a diplomatic obstacle which presents a high degree of difficulty in UN Security Council proceedings and decisions. This paper aims to show situations in which Russia has used military force to achieve foreign policy objectives in the past and also to show situations where it would be likely to use force in the future. As a broad topic that encompasses a variety of information, each of the following case studies of Afghanistan, Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine will be divided into three subsections: international politics, regional politics, and evolution of military strategy components.

The most crucial evolutions in Russia’s use of military force and strategy occurred during the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Specifically, this conflict saw changes from a strictly regimented army into one capable of fighting an asymmetric war. This conflict set the stage for future military development and huge political ramifications like the rise of Islamic terrorism. The invasion’s prologue was rather complex, as the Soviet’s favored leader, Muhammad Daud, began to grow closer to international Islamic factions in 1975. The Shah of Iran, who was loyal to the United States for intelligence and economic reasons, offered support for Daud’s efforts. Daud, along with numerous other Islamic forces, unified the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan and became the ruling party of Afghanistan in 1977. While the chaotic events of the following year are ambiguous in terms of cause or blame, the result was the revolt organized by Soviet-trained Afghan army and air force officers against the Daud government. This ended not only in the removal of said government, but the members of the government were killed. Because the Soviet-trained agents were involved, it is fair to assume that Moscow played a role in orchestrating the revolution. Afghanistan held strategic importance in its capacity as a buffer zone between the pro-west Iran, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent, India. Khrushchev allocated millions of dollars in military, humanitarian, and infrastructural aid to the Afghan government.

Even this aid did not halt resistance against the new ruling party, however, as rebel groups organized “assassination squads conducting house-to-house searches” for Russian nationals, killing them, then desecrating their bodies. In response, Soviet advisors and Soviet-trained elements brutally attacked even loosely-affiliated villages, causing the situation to spiral further out of control and ultimately resulted in more “advisory” forces being sent into Afghanistan. To address the concerns of the international community, the Soviet government insisted that its military intervention was requested by the Afghan government, a claim that would later be proven false.

The invasion itself followed conventional lines: secure urban centers and vital routes of transportation, and then spread out to secure the countryside. Alex Alexiev, author of “The War in Afghanistan: Soviet Strategy and the State of the Resistance,” detailed the Soviet war plan explaining that military, economic, and political planning focused more on influencing the local populations than controlling the terrain. Military operations involved using a relatively small force (which constituted roughly two percent of the entire Soviet military) to take control of the Afghan “logistics networks” and to terrorize or intimidate local villages into selling out the resistance fighters or, at the minimum, stop supporting them. The economic aspect focused on food supply and denying Mujahideen access to food as well as strangling any commerce outside that which was controlled by the Soviet military. Alexiev reports that the Soviet military units destroyed crops with “napalm and...planting anti-personnel mines in the fields.” Soviet forces also disabled irrigation systems, caused artificial price inflation at local markets, and gave farmers incentives to submit to Soviet rule. The Afghan terrain made the latter half of the battle plan difficult to achieve, which explains why the war devolved into a quagmire. A possible reason why this strategy was pursued over holding territory is the importance of depriving the Mujahideen of material support from sympathetic parties. Since the true feelings of the Soviet Politburo have been lost due to self-censorship, one can only speculate on the larger strategy. In his article “The Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy: The Case of Afghanistan,” Joseph Collins argues that the larger strategy was to counter the western influences in the Middle East and especially Iran. In this way, the two previous articles are in agreement: both imply that the invasion contained a certain degree of theater, or, in other words, a broadcast of intent. Each large offensive was widely reported and information was disseminated to intimidate both the fighters and people of Afghanistan.

Throughout the later, counterinsurgency stage of the war, several key issues became apparent: guerrilla warfare was not strictly territorial, US aid to the Mujahideen grounded all but the most vital of helicopter missions, and that the Soviet military alone was not enough to police the nation of Afghanistan. These realities, along with an increasing annual expenditure and domestic protests, forced the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan. That is not to say nothing could be salvaged from the experience, however, as many lessons were learned; arguably the most important being the inadequacy of Soviet Forces. Whether it be due to relatively low troop count or the ingenuity of the Mujahideen, the Soviets were never able to cut off supply lines to the resistance. Foreign aid to resistance fighters further compounded the

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problem for Soviet planners, especially because support came from the United States, Pakistan, and numerous wealthy private benefactors. The Soviet Union came to know that winning the hearts and minds, or at the very least securing the obedience of local populations was necessary to success in an invasion and that heavy handed tactics that constitute nothing less than a terror campaign did more to motivate local populations against them.

Roughly the same situation would arise five years later during the First Chechen War. Immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Chechens tried to declare independence, but the process would not be completed until 1993. This prompted Boris Yeltsin's government to send in troops "to restore constitutional order." This is important because like Afghanistan, the Russian government did not want to appear as the aggressor. The first Chechen conflict is succinctly described by former Russian military analyst, Pavel Felgenhauer, who describes the situation as a "strategic improvisation." Both Chechen wars would expose critical flaws in the organizational structure of the Russian military as well as issues with the conscripts filling out the ranks along with the tactics they used (or forgot to use). Russian action in Chechnya began years before formal military intervention in December of 1994. Federal Security Service (FSB) operations aimed to arm and supply mercenaries for opposition groups against the new Dudayev regime in Chechnya. Felgenhauer goes on to outline the fundamental problems with the Russian military during the initial stages of the invasion and the war. There was a massive amount of disorder among ground units as well as resistance to the order to move to combat areas brought on by the combination of troops from all different types of units. Due to the combination of factors, morale among Russian internal troops was dangerously low and had adverse effects on combat performance. Operational struggles were exacerbated by poor tactics and strategists forgetting lessons learned in Afghanistan. The intervention itself was modeled on the U.S. led coalition's invasion of Iraq during the First Gulf War, but the Russian interior troops did not have the coordination, organization, training, or numbers to achieve the same result. Russian forces did capture the Chechen capital of Grozny, but intense fighting and heavy losses forced Moscow to appeal for a ceasefire and eventual peace treaty. Ultimately, this conflict led to war crimes accrued by excessive artillery usage and engagements of undisciplined units. A key weakness in the Russian military was exposed during this conflict: the lack of professionalism and poor quality of a conscription based military.

The 1999 apartment bombings in Russia reopened these wounds. To build a case for war, Russian officials were quick to blame the bombings in Buikansk, Moscow, and Volgograd on a Chechen insurgent group. A fourth bomb was set to explode in Ryazan, but when police apprehended FSB officers with the same make and model of bomb used in the other bombings in the vicinity of an apartment complex, skeptics raised even more questions as to who was truly culpable. Regardless if this attack was a false flag event, Russia went to war over it. The battle plan was much like the initial strategy for Afghanistan in that the primary focus was on urban areas. The lessons from Afghanistan and the First Chechen War were applied during this time: more soldiers were brought in a more organized fashion with better equipment and tactics. The Russian army took its first step toward a professional military akin to Western models by

invading with up to forty percent of ground units enlisted under contracts (contractniki). The Russian strategy as a whole can simply be described in three stages: the invasion, counterinsurgency, and finally the period of self-policing. The first stage succeeded just as it had during the First Chechen War. The second marks another change in the Soviet strategy: use of special forces or Spetsnaz operators in conjunction with contracted soldiers to form the bulk of the offensive forces in counterinsurgency operations. Although a step in the right direction, these tactics were not as effective as modern counterinsurgency operations. The final stage was enlisting the aid of local Chechen confederates to self-police and maintain stability of the region after military occupation was no longer necessary. The Russian federal government placed its faith in Ramzan Kadyrov to use his paramilitary forces to perform this task. Kadyrov and his forces were particularly brutal however, with several alleged violations of human rights occurring under his command.

The most significant changes to the Russian military during the Chechen Wars was refinement of their tactics and taking the first steps toward a professional, modern army. Heavy use of Spetsnaz and contractniki led to a successful counterinsurgency campaign so that later use of local confederate paramilitary groups were able to assume control. Russian military formations were better prepared for the latter conflict as well, because they were trained and underwent regular drills. These moves increased effectiveness of ground forces as well as ushered the Russian military toward a professional military with a higher retention rate of servicemembers than the conscription system.

The 2008 conflict with Georgia marked the next change in Russian foreign policy. Russian activity included a theatrical element for the international community along with unorthodox tactics to weaken the Georgian position. The war with Georgia is significant for two reasons: it expanded the use of power to outside a strictly military capacity, much like Afghanistan and also it serves as a model and a warning about former Soviet States looking to grow closer to the West. The prelude to the war contained a series of diplomatic slights and military skirmishes. During this time Russia engaged in cyber, economic and psychological warfare. The cyber attacks were part of a broader scheme to paint Russia as something other than the aggressor. Ariel Cohen of the Strategic Studies Institute says that Russia's coordinated cyber attack was designed to hamper Georgian communications so that the Russian narrative would be the *only* narrative of events. However, when it was discovered that Georgian government officials were reliant on personal email servers instead of official ones, Russia's cyber exploits were revealed to the international community. The violence was short lived and ended with Russia claiming small portions of Georgia. Cohen argues that the implications from this conflict are the US/NATO affiliation was not a direct deterrent to attack, especially within such short range of the Russian border. The Russian goal was to install a pro-Moscow government, granting Russian citizenship to nationals within the country in order to provide a pretext for invasion and annexation. The 2008 conflict highlights the lack of power the UN and international actors could bring against Russian aggression.

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In light of the continuing proxy war in Ukraine this transfers well to the current situation in Ukraine since many of the same factors existed in the prelude to the conflict as well. Within the Russian government there existed a desire to reclaim the former Soviet sphere of influence over former Soviet countries. When the “little green men,” armed and uniformed like Russian troops, occupied Crimea it seemed that Russia was acting on that desire by standing watch over the Crimean referendum. In his address to the world concerning the Crimean crisis, Vladimir Putin constantly stressed that the wishes of the people should be honored but also implied that Russia was the true owner of Sevastopol and Crimea proper from the beginning which leads us to believe that the conquest of eastern Ukraine is one of reclamation. In the military respects, the conflict in Ukraine is the culmination of lessons learned in previous wars. The war in Afghanistan taught the Soviet military how to wage war in difficult terrain and without helicopters. The Chechen wars reinstituted urban and positional warfare tactics as well as use of special forces along with a trend toward professional soldiers. And the Georgian war expands the scope of the conflict to outside a strict military definition. What the conflict in Ukraine adds is a layer of ambiguity, or what Mary Connell and Ryan Evans of the CNA Corporation calls the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’. They offer this definition “the term applies in situations in which a state or non-state belligerent actor deploys troops and proxies in a deceptive and confusing manner—with the intent of achieving political and military effects while obscuring the belligerent’s direct participation.” With the well documented supply convoys originating within Russia and ending up at pro-Russian separatist camps, it is clear that Russia is participating in the conflict, yet denies any involvement even after many UN member states imposed sanctions on several members of the Russian government. As for the future evolution of the use of force, Connell and Evans make it clear that the Russian strategy components carefully planned and are specifically made to former Soviet states where ethnic Russians reside. It appears that the Gerasimov doctrine exists as a circumvention of the NATO treaty so that Russia may still pursue its immediate, regional foreign policy without directly drawing NATO into a war.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of use of Russian military force has gone through distinct periods of change. The War in Afghanistan forced the Soviet Union to learn how to fight unconventional and fourth generation wars, akin to the US experience in Vietnam. These lessons were then applied to the wars in Chechnya. Due to resistance within the ranks, a heavier emphasis was placed on professional soldiers and special operations forces, especially to run counterinsurgency missions. The War in Georgia expanded the scope of war beyond combat arms to include cyber and economic warfare. And finally, the conflict in Ukraine takes all of these lessons into account but places them under the Gerasimov Doctrine of Ambiguous Warfare. In terms of future conflicts, if previous conflicts may be used as a blueprint, the next targets of Russian military force will be former Soviet States suffering from political division.

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